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September 3, 2008
PAO 09-03B-08

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Christopherson departs to Baton Rouge in wake of recent storms

NOTE: Lt. Col. Reid Christopherson, a member of the South Dakota Air National Guard, deployed to assist with the National Guard public affairs effort in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. This weekend, he responded to the call for help and left for Baton Rouge, La.

“We’ll leave the light on for you”

by Lt. Col Reid A Christopherson
South Dakota Air National Guard

BATON ROUGE, La. - It was a dark and stormy night! Okay, I readily admit – it is an overused cliché; but it really was a dark and stormy night! It didn’t; however, start out that way for me. It was a beautiful late summer morning as I drove past the bountiful rows of ripening corn departing my rural home west of Garretson, S.D. An airline flight from Sioux Falls to Minneapolis placed me in what should have been a “happening” place with the Republican National Convention in town. But Hurricane Gustav in the Gulf Coast had more than dampened the spirit in many places. It was that same storm catalyst that was providing me with a destination “somewhere” in Louisiana.

The National Guard Bureau Public Affairs office had put out a nation-wide call over the Labor Day holiday weekend for augmentees. Having served in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and during Hurricane Rita in September 2005, it was an easy decision for me to return to the Pelican State. I had met many great friends in the Louisiana National Guard on the first trip. It was a very personal calling for me to return to their assistance for Hurricane Gustav three years later.

It had been a challenge to arrange for the short-notice travel into the eye of the storm. Experience had taught me to first find a rental car and then to fly to whatever airport it was located at. This time my destination was Jackson, Miss., with interim stops in Minneapolis and Memphis. Things were going too smoothly so it was no surprise to land in Memphis and learn that my final flight to Jackson had been cancelled due to local airport conditions. In other words, there was a really big storm going through named “Gustav”. No problem; however, for a 40-year member of the Boy Scouts of America. A rental car was procured and my grossly overweight bags were reclaimed. The nose of the car was pointed towards New Orleans via Interstate 55. My “Be

Prepared” training led me to an enroute stop in Jackson for fuel and provisions. It was a good decision as it would be my last exposure to “normal” as I continued south.

I approached McComb, Miss. I didn’t need anything but still erred on the side of filling the gas tank if possible. It wasn’t! A Red Cross shelter was already filled to capacity and as the transformer on the electrical pole behind the church, now turned shelter, exploded another town was being left in the dark. The evening was early, so why not continue south?

We now return to the “dark and stormy night”. High winds, driving rain, limited visibility and the occasional pine tree lying across the lane or lanes of the interstate provided ample tasks to focus upon. Operational risk management was further influenced by radio reports of nearly 100 percent electrical black-out, widespread damage and a pending eight o’clock p.m. curfew in my destination city of Baton Rouge. I knew where I was headed but it wouldn’t be easier with trees and power lines in the streets of a pitch black town. Hammond, La., approximately 330 miles from my starting point in Memphis, sounded like a good “hunker down” location for the night.

The town was totally black! My initial plan was to find a familiar landmark and to camp out in the parking lot for the night. I caught a glimpse of some “Golden Arches” but the rope across their parking entrance pushed me farther into town. I could identify faint symbols of a college campus and saw flashing lights of emergency vehicles in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Then I saw it! Just like the historical slogan of a national motel chain, someone had “left the light on for me!” One building and an adjacent parking lot, of what appeared to be a beautiful college campus, had lights! Like a moth to a flame, I was attracted to the beacon. My initial plan remained: find a safe sheltered location, rely upon my provisions and camp out in the rental car for the night. The lighted building; however, invited my inspection. A uniformed Soldier of the Louisiana Army National Guard at the entrance gave me hope and the welcome mat to even more great Pelican State friends.

The Louisiana State Department of Social Services had taken over the Center for Kinesiology and Health Studies on the campus of Southeastern Louisiana University. They were making good use of the generator power, lights, air conditioning, water and sewer. All were perhaps non-existent luxuries in the surrounding city. A temporary shelter had been created for over 100 guests that presented themselves with a variety of special needs. Their normal homes were, in some cases, nursing homes and assisted living centers. Other remained in their homes, but all needed some type of minimal medical assistance. For many it was simply the need to access electrical power for their oxygen equipment. Others had complicated medical histories that placed them at high risk for infections or illness. Over 75 talented medical and social service personnel left the needs of their own families behind as they attended to the needs of this new and eclectic family.

And, like every national disaster over nearly four centuries of time, the “Guard” was there! A diverse mix of Soldiers from varying maintenance and military intelligence companies of the Louisiana Army National Guard had been assembled and dispatched to this next mission in their lives. And, fortunately they had “left the light on for me”! I was quickly welcomed in like one of their own. Their lieutenants and first sergeant, known as usual simply as “Top”, displayed the

ultimate professionalism and dedication as their mission just became somewhat complicated by an Air National Guard Lieutenant Colonel from of all places, South Dakota! How in the world did this happen? They provided me with shelter, a hot shower, a ration of their peanut butter sandwiches, a great story and warm friendships.

Their initial mission was to provide a secure structure for the nearly 200 guests and staff of this shelter. Their real mission; however, was to provide hope and very willing helping hands! Their youth and energy were eagerly recruited as a large patient required lifting assistance or a blind guest attempted to navigate around a hallway cluttered with shelter supplies. The shelter team applauded their contributions in a very high demand mission well outside the scope of their normal military occupational skills. Each of these Soldiers had family concerns of their own. For Sgt. Leatha Thornton, 3673rd Maintenance Company Louisiana Army National Guard (LAARNG), her own family had heeded the mandatory evacuation of New Orleans and was now in Saint Paul, Minn. I eagerly shared that all was well in St. Paul when I had passed through the airport earlier in the day.

The Soldiers provided a vivid demonstration of the diverse skills that each Soldier and Airmen brings to the fight! Their ranks included not only Sgt. Thornton, a special officer for an investigative service, but others like Spc. Brock Knight, a member of the 3673rd Maintenance Company who is a customs agent; 1st Lt. Timothy Berrian of the 3673rd Maintenance Company who works for the Jefferson Parrish Sheriff's Office and Sgt. Chad Alderman, a member of the 415th Military Intelligence Company and a chemical engineer.

The first light of the morning brought hope and life to the campus. Surrounding damage was limited to trees and branches. The campus student center ejected, like Jonah being spit from the whale's belly, scores of talented utility linesmen who had also found shelter the previous night. They now pointed their bucket trucks towards the downed power lines and into the devastation of southern Louisiana. For me it was time to also continue my journey. The visible damage enroute validated my decision to "hunker down" the previous night. My arrival at the Emergency Operations Center of the Louisiana State Patrol in Baton Rouge now leaves me positioned for my next mission, my next adventure, and my next new friends!